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FALSE PREMISES:
FIVE ONE-ACT PLAYS

By Laurence Housman

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The British
Drama
League

THE BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE PLAYS

FALSE PREMISES

FIVE ONE ACT PLAYS BY

LAURENCE HOUSMAN

These Plays have been selected for publication by the Reading Committee of the British Drama League.

FALSE PREMISES

Five One Act Plays by Laurence Housman

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

THE TORCH OF TIME
A Study in Revolution

MOONSHINE

A FOOL AND HIS MONEY
A Wayside Comedy

THE HOUSE-FAIRY

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Scenes & Characters

The Christmas Tree

Scene: *A cottage interior*

A Mother. A Child. Old Sammy

The Torch of Time

Scene: *A suburban interior*

Anthony Brailson, an old money-lender

Matthew Brailson, his son

Partrick; Channing

activists of the revolution

Moonshine

Scene: *Night in a quiet street*

A Pierrot. An Old Man. Santa Claus

A Policeman

A Fool and His Money

Scene: *A country road*

Tim. Tony. The Fool

The House-Fairy

Scene: *A cottage interior*

A Mother. A Child

An Old Woman (The Fairy)

The Christmas Tree

[*The woman, slow to attend, speaks in a tone of patient weariness. Her voice, even when she seems to complain, is mild and compassionate: in a body broken by hardship the spirit has become almost resigned; yet there is a strain of anxiety as though where hope has long since died fear remains. In contrast the* CHILD'S *voice, eager and wistful, still lays claim to the chances of pleasure or of interest which life may offer. Now, obeying her mother, she goes to draw across the window the thin wisp of curtain which hangs on a loop of cord. This takes a little time. The* MOTHER *glances at the Tree; but the sight does not seem to cheer her. Half fearfully she looks away again and stands in reverie.*

CHILD [*singing to herself*]. I'll draw the curtain! I'll draw the curtain! I'll—[*suddenly she stops, turning from the window*]. Mother, there was someone looking in.

MOTHER. Was there? Who was it?

CHILD. I don't know who it was: 'twas an old woman, mother; she'd got her face up to one of the panes looking at yer. But when I looked at her, her seemed to go. . . . How many candles is there, mother?

MOTHER. Twelve: one each.

CHILD. One each what?

MOTHER. One for each of yer.

CHILD. Is that why we've *always* had twelve?

MOTHER. Of course. Why else?

CHILD. But now I be the only one left.

MOTHER [*violently*]. No, you're not! Don't you dare say it! [*then restraining herself*]. You're the only one *left at home.*

[*The* CHILD *has now pushed a stool toward the Christmas Tree, and mounting it with difficulty she proceeds to light the candles.*

CHILD. There's more of us dead than alive now, ain't there, Mother?

MOTHER. Aye, for a long time it's been like that.

CHILD. Did we ever have the Tree without—without some of us being away?

MOTHER. I daresay: we may have done. I've lost count now. But there was always a candle for each. It seemed to bring 'em back somehow—just like as they was when I saw 'em last—living or dead. They're all gone, but I see 'em still.

CHILD. It's ever such a big tree, Mother! Where did you get it?

MOTHER. Old Sammy brought it to the door on his hand-cart, and I gave him twopence for it. He'd got a lot of others too,—how I don't know. I daresay he stole 'em; so it was better not to ask. [*She starts to cut bread.*

CHILD. Old Sammy ain't quite right in his head, is he, Mother?

MOTHER. Oh, he's 'armless enough!

CHILD. When we see him going by with his old cart and his head wagging—coming from school—we all laugh at him.

MOTHER. You shouldn't do that! [*Pointing toward her with the knife, then laying it down.*

CHILD. One can't help—not when all the others do. The other day, when his silly old back was turned, some of the boys run away with his cart and took the faggots off for the bonfire. But I didn't take any. I only went along with 'em just to see.

MOTHER. You shouldn't 'a done it. You ought to be kind to the old. He's poor and feeble, Sammy is. . . . Often, I reckon, he don't get enough to eat—nor for firing neither, beyond what he sells.

CHILD [*regarding her handiwork*]. They do look pretty, don't they, Mother?

MOTHER [*in lack-lustre tone*]. Aye. So you've got 'em all lighted?

CHILD. I had to climb up to reach the one at the top.

MOTHER. Well, that's your own. So you ought to 'a took care to light that.

CHILD. Is that for me, what's hanging below it: that little parcel o' blue?

MOTHER. Aye, it'll be yours presently.

CHILD. What's in it, Mother? May I open it?

MOTHER. No: you don't open it yet. You must wait for the hour to strike, when the Christmas chimes begin.

CHILD. Is there something for the others, too?

MOTHER. Yes; something for all of ye.

CHILD. The others won't come for theirs, though, will they?

MOTHER. I don't know. They haven't come yet.

CHILD. Some *can't* come, Mother.

MOTHER. No, I know that: but it helps me to think of 'em. Why shouldn't I? I won't have *you* be the last.

CHILD. Have the parcels all got their names on 'em?

MOTHER. Not the parcels. I've put a name round each candle, you'll see.

[*The* CHILD *goes to look and reads.*

CHILD. "Minnie." Where'll she be to-night, Mother?

MOTHER. She's still at her place, you know that. Why d'you ask?

CHILD. I mean—she won't be here: not to-night, will she?

MOTHER. No: she'll be thinking of us, though. Then I send her's on to her; and she gets it for the new year.

CHILD [*reading*]. "Tom." He won't get his, —not for a long while.

MOTHER. Not till his ship comes back.

CHILD [*reading*]. "John." I don't remember him.

MOTHER. He died—little: before you was born.

CHILD [*reading*]. "Sarah." She died too, didn't she . . . Mother?

MOTHER. What are you asking for? You know they've all died but you three. Here, come and have your tea.

CHILD [*pausing on the way*]. Doesn't it look nice, Mother?

MOTHER. It's as it always did look. Yes, I suppose it do look nice—if you've eyes for it. Else why should folk be having it every year? But it makes a sort of a light—a sort of a light. And there's three of you still left.

CHILD. What are you crying for, Mother? I don't like you to cry.

MOTHER. No, and I don't do it to amuse myself, neither. But when you've got the tears in yer, they 'ave to come—sometimes. Here, get here and sit on me! [*The* CHILD *obeys.*] We'll have our tea together like, won't we? You are my one home-lamb left, arn't yer?—you out of the three. P'raps you'd have gone too, if you'd had legs for it. But you came

into the world too late; and I was tired of having 'em—all die.

CHILD. Why did they all die, Mother?

MOTHER. Ah! . . . it's not many of 'em as you can remember. Half of 'em was gone before you came. Then your father died. After that I got rest.

CHILD. I don't remember him, do I?

MOTHER. No: you don't.

CHILD. What was he like?

MOTHER. And don't need to. . . . Well, he'd a hard life: so I don't blame him. . . . Who's that? . . . I thought I 'eard . . . Here, go and look out of the window, and see who it is!

CHILD. I didn't hear anyone.

MOTHER. There's someone there.

[*The* CHILD *goes across and lifts the curtain.*

CHILD. Oh! . . . There was a lot more, Mother, all looking in. They've gone now.

MOTHER. "Looking in?" How could they look in, when the curtain was drawn?

CHILD. They was, Mother. She'd got children with her.

MOTHER. "She"? Who d'you mean—"she"?

CHILD. That same old woman as was looking before. I see a large mole on her face,—just there.

MOTHER [*deeply agitated*]. You don't know what you're talking about! Come 'ere, sit

down again! Make up the fire: it's gone cold. And don't you do it again! Don't laugh at old Sammy. You leave the old ones alone; else you may be sorry for it! Ah, I was young once like you: I hadn't learned then. I've knowed better since. Have you ever heard me talk of your grandfather,—my father, that was? He was quite well off. And I was his favourite, then. He used to call me his "little merry-thought." You wouldn't think that now, would yer? And fond of me he was, too,—in a way; but after I'd left him to marry, he'd never have me home again.

CHILD. Why not, Mother?

MOTHER. Well, it was just 'ow it took him. He was so fond of me he couldn't forgive my going away with somebody else—not of his own choosing. So I . . . well, here I be.

[*Her thoughts drift away for a moment.*

CHILD. What else did he do, Mother?

MOTHER. Nothing. When he died, he left all his money to strangers. It did seem 'ard. . . . But I wasn't going to tell you about that: what was it? Oh,—about when I was at school, before all the luck went. You, and old Sammy, and his wood-cart reminded me. There was an old woman in our village, people said was a witch, because she'd got the devil's mark on her face and always kep' a fire in;

wouldn't never let it go out. And I was like a boy then, ready to play tricks on people,—not to do 'em any harm, only to get the laugh of 'em. So one day, because others dared me to do it, I poured water down her chimney, and put out the fire,—in the middle of summer it was—not thinking to do her no harm. But she come after me and put a curse on me for it . . . we was just sitting at tea, and she come to the window and give cry; and father, he got up and went out and drove her away. Within a week she was dead, and they all said 'twas the putting out of 'er fire that killed 'er, —and praised me for it. But ever since, I've had that curse in my mind, for more than a bit of it has come true. She said I should have an unlucky marriage, and a lot of children, as shouldn't live, she said. They'd all die, she said, before I did. . . . Twelve . . . oh, what am I talking of? They ain't all dead yet, there's two others besides you; and now I shan't be long. But that's why I keep 'em by me with their names on those candles. It seems to bring 'em back somehow—wherever they are. And there shan't none of 'em be the last. No: I'd rather die. And if I told yer, you'd run away, wouldn't yer?

CHILD. I wouldn't run away, Mother,—not from you.

MOTHER [*in a fierce frightened tone*]. Oh, yes, you would, when I told you to run. [*A shudder passes over her, and she goes on speaking with haste and forced gaiety.*] Here! go on, have your tea! Ah, we've had merry times round the Tree,—sometimes a many, sometimes only a few: I can hear 'em, I can see 'em, laughing, talking—playing together—opening their little parcels and looking at 'em one by one. But there won't never be a last: don't you fear it. That ain't going to be true. [*As she speaks the clock has tolled the hour: the Christmas chimes begin.*] Ah! There are the bells. So now, I suppose, you want to go and see what's in it? There. Go on with yer! [*As the* CHILD *hobbles toward the Tree a knock is heard.*] Who's that? Come in! [*Enter* OLD SAMMY, *with silly hairless face and wagging head. When he speaks it is this way and that in soft broken chuckles, indicative of a brain partly astray.*

CHILD. Why, it's old Sammy, Mother!

SAMMY. So you've got your Christmas Tree lighted, have yer, eh? They burn well, do they—them candles,—eh? Well, well! it's—it's a still night, and there ain't no wind—only frost.

MOTHER. What have you come for, Sammy? D'you want anything?

SAMMY. Come for? Oh, only to tell yer a thing. They children—yours and them others —they upset my wood-cart; and they—well, I can't do with 'em. . . . So you like your Christmas Tree, do yer? And there's no denying it looks cheerful there in the light. You wouldn't never think, would yer, from the look of it, that it come from the old burying ground where a man once hanged himself,— and off an old witch-woman's grave? But it did. And I've sold 'em all the same, like as I've sold you; and now I'm going round telling 'em. Merry Christmas to you! . . . Merry Christmas, to you! . . . Merry Christmas Missus! . . . Lost your voice, have yer? . . . Eh!

[*He goes out chuckling. The* MOTHER *stands not looking at the Tree, the lights on which begin to burn blue, only the topmost flame remains as before.*

MOTHER. Put out them lights,—on that tree!

CHILD. Mother! Oh, look!

MOTHER. Put them out!

CHILD. I daren't go near 'em.

MOTHER. You lighted 'em. Why not?

CHILD. They're all changed like!

MOTHER [*turning to look*]. Ah!

CHILD. All but mine. . . . What are you looking at, Mother?

MOTHER. Corpse-lights! Corpse-lights! Only one left! Ah, I knew it 'ud come! I knew it 'ud come!

CHILD. What's come, Mother?

MOTHER. The end's come! The end! Minnie—'er's gone too now; and Tom. [*She rushes to the window and looks out.*] Ah! I see 'em all! I see 'em all! And now you be the last! Run! Run!

CHILD. Don't, Mother! Don't look like that!

MOTHER. And she said—she said—she said that when they was all dead but one, I should kill the last of 'em. And now I've got to do it!—Quick, quick! Come 'ere!

CHILD. No, Mother! Mother! Mother! [*Backing in terror, the* CHILD *knocks over the lamp and hobbles desperately away. The* MOTHER *snatches up the knife.*

MOTHER. What for didn't you go when I told you to run? [*In the darkness comes a confused scuffle, then a cry. The* CHILD'S *hand drags at the curtain. It falls. At the window are seen the dead faces. A heavy fall is heard. The topmost light burns blue. The* MOTHER *is seen crouching across a chair.*] My lamb! My lamb! Her couldn't run. My little lame lamb!

CURTAIN

The Torch of Time

A Study in Revolution

The Torch of Time

THE *three men are seated together by the table in a large, very barely furnished apartment. It is night, the room is illumined by lamplight: rain whips the window; an apology for a fire smoulders in the grate.*

PARTRICK. Channing, don't be so damned methodical! You are wasting time like a lawyer. Let the beginning wait: tell us the end. Any traces? Have you found anything?

CHANNING. Traces plenty: found nothing.

MATTHEW. You mean that the Fund is somewhere?

CHANNING. Should be. It was once.

MATTHEW. When?

CHANNING. Oh, fifty,—forty years ago!

PARTRICK. I thought we knew that much to begin with. What's the good of it now?

MATTHEW. "Traces" you said?

CHANNING. Yes, if Partrick will only listen.

PARTRICK. Well, well, go on!

CHANNING. When the old League disrupted, there was a further disruption—among the seceders, I mean. There, also, you had a majority and a minority. The majority was all

for direct action. Well, they acted, and they failed. Everyone with any sense knew they would fail. The minority just went out of sight.

MATTHEW. The sensible ones?

PARTRICK. But surely, it was the *other* majority —the constitutionalists—who had the funds?

CHANNING. They thought so.

MATTHEW. They *said* so.

CHANNING. They found they didn't: Farnell had been too quick for them. Finding they had been fooled, they lay low about it—there being no way of getting at Farnell legally. Six months later he died in exile and penury: what penury nobody knew at the time—practically starving.

MATTHEW. Surely nobody ever suspected *him*.

PARTRICK. Of feathering his own nest? None who knew him.

CHANNING. All the same our Government got their police to raid him:—one of those friendly illegal things Governments do for each other. No doubt they hoped to find something.

MATTHEW. Perhaps they did.

CHANNING. You might have thought so. But six months later they were still casting about for information: paid something for it too, and got nothing for their pains. There you have the beginning of the traces I spoke about.

That has gone on. Whenever there has been fresh trouble, the Government has always acted on the assumption that we had big funds at our disposal.

PARTRICK. Ha! If we only had, the thing would be through! We have everything now but that,—the people with us: they can't govern the country! We've the men, the spirit, the opportunity—such as will never recur again —only the means lacking. We are starved, cleaned out!

MATTHEW. And Farnell's famous "plan": any news of that?

CHANNING. There were three men who'd seen it: two are dead. The other I've been to myself: old now, and feeble; his recollection of it is vague and in pieces,—no value to be got from it. But he says that when it was shown to them—he a young man then—it was so beautiful, so daring, so original, that they cried for mere joy and excitement.

MATTHEW. Nelson's Captains, I read somewhere, did that over his plan for the battle of Trafalgar.

CHANNING. This was like it, then.

MATTHEW. Fifty years ago: could it apply now?

CHANNING. Some of it might—in a country that has stood still, under a Government that

has learned nothing. It's amazing how stupid unresisted tyranny makes people!

PARTRICK. Which? The tyrannized—or the tyrant?

CHANNING. Both.

MATTHEW. If the Fund still exists, the Plan may be in the same hands.

CHANNING. Very likely: but where?

PARTRICK. Yes! And what are the blind fools doings? Here's the opportunity we've worked, starved, hoped for, and they don't show themselves! It's maddening, perfectly maddening!

MATTHEW. We mustn't overlook one possibility. All revolutionaries are not like Farnell. If the funds amounted to much, and were in the hands of an uncontrolled few—they may have gone anywhere, before we were even born.

CHANNING. Still the Government doesn't think so.

PARTRICK. No?

CHANNING. Within the last month one of our members—whom it keeps in its pay—Barrett (you know the man, Brailson,—one of your father's clerks, isn't he?) came and told me they'd offered him a big reward for its discovery.

MATTHEW. How much?

CHANNING. Five thousand pounds.

PARTRICK. It must be a big thing, then!

MATTHEW. Yes; I know the man. I see him when I go to my father's office. But I didn't know he was one of us.

CHANNING. Using him as we do, it's better for him to keep away. Our fellows might suspect him.

PARTRICK. Is he a man we can trust?

CHANNING. The Government trusts him, apparently. That's something to have achieved.

MATTHEW. Oh, he's capable, I haven't a doubt. He has been my father's right hand man now for over twenty years.

PARTRICK. A curious position, Matthew, if you'll allow me to say so—grinding the faces of the poor for his daily wage, and working secretly for their political freedom! You'll pardon the remark.

MATTHEW. I've never attempted to defend my father's business, Partrick. As you know, I'm not in it.

CHANNING. You might be more useful if you were. Partner in a firm of rack-renters and money-lenders, who would ever suspect you?

MATTHEW. There are some sacrifices one can't make, Channing, even for one's country.

CHANNING. That shows weakness of character.

MATTHEW. Oh, no doubt.

PARTRICK. This Barrett, then? The Government thinks it has in him a man near the centre of things?

CHANNING. We supply him with information which makes them think so.

PARTRICK. But really?

CHANNING. Barrett has his use and understands it. We tell him what we want passed on, and he doesn't ask for more. He is quite intelligent, and has given the Government very valuable information, now and then—plans which we intended to drop, divulged by him, have come to nothing. And the Government plumes itself and pays him by supposed results; which enables him to contribute handsomely to our funds.

MATTHEW. As much as he gets, do you think?

CHANNING. That I can't say.

PARTRICK. Could a revolutionary do less?

MATTHEW. I should have thought not.

CHANNING. I don't know. Could he do that without arousing their suspicions?

MATTHEW. Perhaps not: or live up to his actual takings without arousing ours.

PARTRICK. H'm. You don't think well of him?

MATTHEW. He's in my father's business, so I'm prejudiced.

PARTRICK. Anyway, what is Barrett to tell

them about the Fund? Is he to discover it?

CHANNING. I wish he could. What he asks is whether he's to tell them that it exists and is available.

MATTHEW. And we are asking ourselves precisely the same question! It's comic.

PARTRICK. Tragic, I call it.

MATTHEW. All good tragedies contain comedy. Ours is certainly no exception. I live here with my father. Why? It saves money, and helps to avert suspicion. If you saw us together, you wouldn't think I did it for pleasure: but you might laugh.

PARTRICK. You don't seem to live very luxuriously, I must say.

MATTHEW. I live as he lives. Just now he is keeping to his room, so I was able to ask you in here. In my own room I—I don't have a fire.

PARTRICK. I didn't know there was a fire here. [*Gets up and goes to the fireplace*]. Come, I've known you ten years, Matthew!

[*He puts on two lumps of coal and stirs up the fire.*

MATTHEW. I'm sorry, the coal supply is limited.

PARTRICK. And servants, may one ask?

MATTHEW. A woman comes in by the day. Oh, yes, we live frugally, but as I am generally

out—[*he stops abruptly*]. What is Barrett doing for us just now? Are you using his time?

CHANNING. I haven't seen him for two days. I was to see him to-night.

PARTRICK. By appointment?

CHANNING. Yes. It's about time I was going.

PARTRICK. I'll come with you.

CHANNING. The Government evidently thinks it has got its nose on the track of something. He can tell us more.

PARTRICK. It always pretends to have a nose; but it's really only hay-fever.

CHANNING. From searching hay bundles for lost needles, eh? The immemorial disease of foreign governments!

MATTHEW [*quietly*]. I say, you fellows must go now.

[*While the other two have been chattering preparatory to departure,* MATTHEW *has been listening apprehensively. Now the door opens and reveals the cause of his discomfort. His father, in dressing-gown and muffler, shuffles in, and stands eyeing the visitors with cold disapproval.*

ANTHONY. I hope I don't intrude, Matthew?

MATTHEW. Not at all, sir.

ANTHONY. In my own house, that is.

MATTHEW. I didn't think you would be coming down.

ANTHONY. Oh, so that is to explain it?

MATTHEW. You know—you have met my friend Partrick—and Mr. Channing?

ANTHONY [*with punctilious differentiation*]. Oh, yes I know him. . . . No . . . Don't let me disturb you.

PARTRICK. Don't let *us* disturb *you,* Sir. I was just saying that I must be off.

CHANNING. And I, too, have an appointment.

ANTHONY. Oh, you were? . . . You have, have you? Well, don't let me keep you from it. It's raining hard, gentlemen, you'll get very wet.

PARTRICK. Oh, that doesn't matter. I'm used to it.

ANTHONY. Matter? No. This house isn't conveniently situated for chance visitations: but it suits me very well. Good-night, gentlemen. A glass of something hot—when you get home. [*He seats himself at the table.*

PARTRICK. Good-night, sir.

CHANNING. I'm sorry that we . . .

ANTHONY. Oh, don't mention it! It's over.

[MATTHEW *accompanies them through the door.*

MATTHEW. Shall I lend you a mackintosh?

PARTRICK. Oh no: not a bit necessary.

[*They go. When* MATTHEW *returns, a few moments later, he finds his father taking* PARTRICK'S *two lumps of coal off the fire.*

ANTHONY. Coal is two pounds a ton, Matthew.

MATTHEW. I'm sorry, sir.

ANTHONY. No, you are not; else you wouldn't have done it.

MATTHEW. I'm afraid it was done for me. I apologize.

ANTHONY. What do you know of that Mr. Channing?

MATTHEW. I hardly do know him.

ANTHONY. You asked him here.

MATTHEW. Partrick brought him. I didn't *ask* either of them.

ANTHONY. Oh?

MATTHEW. I don't usually ask friends here—without your permission.

ANTHONY. Very proper of you. That man, Channing, has been in prison. Didn't you know?

MATTHEW. Only on remand. At the trial the jury acquitted him.

ANTHONY. They would have acquitted anyone to hurt the Government. It was a clear case —you know that.

MATTHEW. It didn't specially interest me.

ANTHONY. I don't want people, who qualify for jail, coming here.

MATTHEW. Very well, sir. Are you better this evening,—your cold?

ANTHONY. My cold is better; I'm worse.

MATTHEW. Nothing serious, I hope?

ANTHONY. Old age is always serious. The symptoms do not diminish. Did you call at my office for letters?

MATTHEW. Yes, they're in my bag. I'll get them.

ANTHONY. Did you see Barrett?

MATTHEW. He was away. He hadn't been, they told me.

ANTHONY. Barrett hadn't been! Why, he 'phoned to me himself from the office this morning: *said* he was at the office. [*In a tone of puzzled doubt.*

MATTHEW. No, he hadn't been, sir. There were several letters waiting for you.

[MATTHEW *goes toward the door.*

ANTHONY. Well, I must look through them, I suppose . . . Matthew.

MATTHEW. Yes, sir?

ANTHONY. Oh, yes, get the letters. [MATTHEW *goes out and returns almost immediately with a dispatch-case, which he opens on the table, and gives out letters*]. And don't leave the door open like that as you go in and out.

Ah, yes: that's the one. [*He takes up a letter from the packet, is about to open it, then pauses*]. Are you going out again this evening, Matthew?

MATTHEW [*sorting papers*]. No, sir.

ANTHONY. Nothing you want to do?

MATTHEW. I've brought some work with me.

ANTHONY. Legal, I suppose?

MATTHEW. The usual.

ANTHONY. You are making a good practice?

MATTHEW. Oh yes: I can't complain.

ANTHONY. Do people trust you?

MATTHEW. I keep my clients.

ANTHONY. That may be only habit.

MATTHEW. They bring along others.

ANTHONY. Ah! that is a recommendation of sorts. You make a good income, I suppose?

MATTHEW. Fairish, as things go.

ANTHONY. What proportion of it do I have for keeping you here?

MATTHEW. You named your own terms, sir, I paid them.

ANTHONY. Yes. Why did you accept?

MATTHEW. It was convenient at the time.

ANTHONY. Convenient? Not pleasant? You wouldn't say pleasant, I suppose?

MATTHEW. Pleasure did not enter into my calculations.

ANTHONY. "At the time" you say. That was

twenty years ago,—almost. Have you never wanted—to set up a house of your own?

MATTHEW. I did not intend to, so long as I could stay here.

ANTHONY. You thought I needed company?

MATTHEW. I never flattered myself that you and I could be company.

ANTHONY. No, and you were quite right. I've got out of the way of wanting company.

MATTHEW. It runs in the family.

ANTHONY. I used to be sociable when I was young.

MATTHEW. That was before my time.

ANTHONY. Before I became a miser. I suppose that's what people call me?

MATTHEW. I don't discuss you with other people, sir.

ANTHONY. Don't you? I wonder why not? . . . Are you fond of me, Matthew?

MATTHEW. No, sir.

ANTHONY. Do you suppose I'm fond of you?

MATTHEW. Really, I never thought. You've never given me any sign of it.

ANTHONY. No. I left off being fond of anybody—a long time ago. It was safest, I found. But I—I respect you, Matthew.

MATTHEW. Thank you, sir.

ANTHONY. Perhaps you don't return the compliment?

MATTHEW. Oh, I respect your consistency.

ANTHONY. About what?

MATTHEW. Devotion to one idea.

ANTHONY. And that?

MATTHEW. The main chance, people generally call it. You never neglect that, do you, sir?

ANTHONY. I suppose you think I'm a rich man?

MATTHEW. Richer that I shall ever be.

ANTHONY [*slightly surprised*]. So you don't expect me to leave you my money, eh?

MATTHEW. I shouldn't take it,—for myself.

ANTHONY. Oh, indeed? Why not?

MATTHEW. I happen not to like the way in which you make it.

ANTHONY. H'm? How is that?

MATTHEW. If I were the sanitary inspector of your rack-rented slums, your income would go.

ANTHONY. Oh, no, it wouldn't. You'd have your price too, then.

MATTHEW. Now you've given me another reason.

ANTHONY. So I'm not to leave my money to you, eh? You'd throw it back at me?

MATTHEW. Oh no, I shouldn't dispute your will, sir.

ANTHONY. Then how would you dispose of it?

MATTHEW. I don't feel called upon to tell you.

ANTHONY. Oh, you don't, you don't? . . . Matthew, put those two lumps of coal on the

fire again. [MATTHEW *does so.*] You'd better put on more: it's a cold night. [MATTHEW *puts on one more.*]

MATTHEW. Is that enough, sir?

ANTHONY. Put on as much as you like. [MATTHEW *pauses surprised, then proceeds*] . . . Eight . . . Did you do that to annoy me, Matthew?

MATTHEW. No, sir. I only took you at your word. It's a cold night.

ANTHONY. Quite right. Yes: twenty-five years ago—say thirty—I was sociable enough. But I repented of it. You study human nature, I suppose, Matthew,—in your profession, I mean?

MATTHEW. Oh, yes.

ANTHONY. Has it never struck you as strange —that you and I have lived together twenty years, without affection, and without quarrelling?

MATTHEW. Not wishing the arrangement to come to an end, I suppose.

ANTHONY. Doesn't that show great self-control?

MATTHEW. I didn't intend to try your temper, sir, more than I could help.

ANTHONY. H'm. I did. Twenty years, Matthew: it has been a test . . . And I'm growing old.

MATTHEW [*pauses: then says venturously*]. How old are you, sir?

ANTHONY. Strange, isn't it,—a son not to know his father's age? . . . I'm seventy-five, Matthew. . . . That's the first question you've ever asked me—about my past self. Oh, yes, entirely my fault, I know. I didn't want to be questioned. I didn't want to be intimate with you. And we are not. One can't begin it now, either: but I'm not talking to a stranger, I know a great deal about you. Do you know, I once put detectives on you?

MATTHEW. Indeed?

ANTHONY. Yes, and for a good time, too. They found nothing out. That was at the time of the trouble in nineteen-sixteen.

MATTHEW [*slightly amused*]. Did you think I was in that?

ANTHONY. If you were, you were clever about it: I don't know. If you were not, you showed your sense . . . [*He eyes his son furtively, then adds*] I would prefer to think that you were not.

MATTHEW [*after a moment of reserve*]. I was asked to be.

ANTHONY. If there'd been anyone with brains to lead it, it would only have come to a bigger smash—more people hanged and shot. . . . Did you know that the Governmment tried

to engineer it—to make it bigger, I mean?

MATTHEW. I didn't know: but I can imagine it.

ANTHONY. Oh, yes; they wanted to get all the clever ones into their net . . . and if they had plied them with funds enough they might have done it. It would have been a great temptation. But they were skinflint where they ought to have been spendthrift. Their agents only provided—fifteen thousand pounds. It wasn't enough.

MATTHEW. You know all this!

ANTHONY. I've known it for years. In one of my slum-tenements there was a man with a large family—been a kind of leader in his day, but when he came to me he'd ten starving mouths to feed, and I was to take pity on 'em with the rent. Well, he told me all I wanted to know, and I could have got a price for it—but I didn't.

MATTHEW [*blandly surprised*]. Why not?

ANTHONY. 'Twasn't my business, Matthew. It's only in my business—and here—that I'm the miser. I've got to be consistent, as you say. . . . Now I'll look at these letters.

MATTHEW. I'll go and work in my own room.

ANTHONY. Why? Have you got a fire there?

MATTHEW. No.

ANTHONY. Don't. Come and sit down, Matthew. I want to speak to you . . . I don't

ask you to give me your confidence; and mind you, I don't *know* anything,—you've been too clever for me. But I suspect that you're—one of them, a Leaguer, eh? You needn't answer. The Government doesn't suspect *you*: you've got brains, Matthew. You got 'em from me, your mother hadn't any.

MATTHEW. My mother!

ANTHONY. First time you've ever heard me speak of her, eh?

MATTHEW. Yes.

ANTHONY. We've been a strange family: you and I . . . and she. . . . Well, if you want to ask me questions, you may.

MATTHEW. No, sir.

ANTHONY. People thought your mother ran away from me—to America. But she didn't: only wouldn't take my advice. A heart, but no brain. She was shot, in the rising of eighty-six—you were two years old then—shot for wearing a man's clothes and carrying arms.

MATTHEW [*very softly*]. God!

ANTHONY. She didn't go under my name: nobody knew. And it all failed damnably, as I told them it would fail. I left off being "sociable" after that.

MATTHEW. You—were you—in it?

ANTHONY. I've just told you, I wasn't. I'm

not a fool, Matthew, nor are you. *You* weren't in the nineteen-sixteen. . . . But I'm growing old, and it isn't the body now: it's the brain, too. I've not much more life in me: and when I die—when I die . . . [*He sits ruminating, then adds*]. I've been waiting . . . [*After a pause, with abrupt change of tone*]. Barrett hadn't been at the office, you say? There's a man who, I suppose, you think knows all about me and that "consistency" of mine you so admire. Barrett only knows what I choose him to know. Barrett thinks he knows what I'm worth. He doesn't . . . he never will. I haven't made a will, Matthew, I'm intestate. You can claim if you like: its thirty thousand or thereabouts. The law'll take its pickings: you'll get the rest—to dispose of as you please. . . . You don't like the way I came by it, you say? What are all these people whom I grind money out of from week to week—dirty, drinking, swilling swine? What do they care, except for their own bellies? Isn't it good for 'em to make 'em starve? Is the tax I put on them as heavy as the tax they put on themselves? Is what they pay me for a roof to cover their carcases, and all the miseries they beget—is it so much as what they all steal from their children to pour

in liquor down their own damned throats? Isn't it good for 'em that I should take every penny I can get?

MATTHEW. What you take doesn't come off the drink bill, you may be sure of that.

ANTHONY. If I left them with more, they'd only drink more, and the world would be worse than it is.

MATTHEW. Ah! That's the old argument!—The excuse we make to ourselves over all our ill-gotten wealth. *We* know how to spend it, they don't: so we are right in robbing them!

ANTHONY. Oh, yes, I reckoned you'd be a Radical—in your politics. I'm not. The material doesn't exist. Try it, it crumbles in your hand! The slave is a slave all through: it's in his blood—it's instinctive, like touching his hat to the man he hates. He's "consistent" Matthew—so I suppose you respect him: I don't.

MATTHEW. Slavery is a social product; and like other nuisances it can't cure itself. You don't sterilize a muck-heap by adding to it, or by beating it down. Thirty thousand pounds, you say? What has that done for you? Are you thirty times or even three times happier now than when it was only one thousand?

ANTHONY. One doesn't make money to be happy, Matthew: one makes it to get power.

MATTHEW. That's true. But have you used it?

ANTHONY. It's there.

MATTHEW. And you aren't going to make a will! Isn't that a confession in itself? You've got power which you won't use, or even direct.

ANTHONY. I'm growing old, Matthew . . . I . . . [*He looks at his son with a curious helplessness: the word fails him.*

MATTHEW [*discerningly, almost kindly*]. You've something you want to say to me. What is it?

ANTHONY. Yes: something I want to say. It has got to be said somehow . . . I suppose it was a surprise to you to hear that your mother was—a rebel?

MATTHEW. Yes.

ANTHONY. How does it strike you—now?

MATTHEW. Oh . . . it helps to explain things . . . your silence.

ANTHONY. About her?

MATTHEW. About everything.

ANTHONY. Oh, no! I'd learned my lesson before then. Great hearts can ruin great causes —if they haven't brains . . . I warned them: they wouldn't hear. After that—I shut my mouth.

MATTHEW. Then—you *were* in it!

ANTHONY. On the contrary, I came out of it.

MATTHEW. But you had been.

ANTHONY. Well,—anyway Farnell trusted me . . . And no one else knew.

MATTHEW. That you belonged? . . . Farnell!

[*The name startles thought, which turns suddenly to suspicion; meanwhile the old man's justification of himself goes on.*

ANTHONY. I separated myself from failure. If they had had the funds, it would only have been a bigger one.

MATTHEW. God! [*Seeing his father as a thief.*

ANTHONY. Brains, Matthew, brains! Everything perishes—if it hasn't brains behind it.

MATTHEW [*passionately*]. That is not true! Folly, and blindness, and betrayal—everything that could kill we have gathered to our bosom like sheaves. But the Cause lives still!

ANTHONY. So does a paralytic. What's the good?

MATTHEW. Farnell? You say he trusted you . . . The Plan: did you ever see that?

ANTHONY. No . . . But I have it here. I've never broken the seal. What was the use, when the men who could make good with it didn't exist?

[*He draws out a stout sealed envelope and lays it on the table.* MATTHEW *looks at it fascinated.*

MATTHEW. You had it here—all the time?

ANTHONY. No; only the last two days. I brought it back with me from the office the last time.

MATTHEW. You kept it *there?*

ANTHONY. Oh, no, no! A Bank's a safer place than a money-lender's office: less danger of fire and thieves . . . I brought it back—for *you* . . . Yes; three days ago I made up my mind. I found I was growing old. I've got to hand it on now. [*Then, with a sudden flash of emotion*]. The time's come! It's the Torch, Matthew, the Torch!

[MATTHEW *sits dazed at the sudden revelation which is overthrowing his suspicions.*

MATTHEW. But—what have you done with the Fund? Where is that?

ANTHONY [*In caustic triumph*]. Ah! so you come to that, do you? Yes the plan's nothing without the Fund . . . [*With cold tensity he reveals the secret*]. The Fund is at the same bank, Matthew, where that came from; [*he touches the sealed packet*] held under two signatures. One—ready for use—lies here in this packet: the other is mine.

MATTHEW. Yours!

ANTHONY. Mine, under another name—the name under which I've handled the Fund for the last—forty years. Bearer-bonds, Matthew, it's all bearer-bonds! You must get

them out of the country quick—to Paris, or New York. You can raise money on them there. Not all in one boat, though. It's a big sum; it has grown, double, treble! Forty years. It isn't six figures, Matthew, it's seven!

MATTHEW. Oh, wait! wait! I can't—take it in, yet!—seven?

ANTHONY. I've been waiting for you—twenty years. And now, now the day of salvation has come! No matter if I don't live to see it. You will! . . . It's the Torch, Matthew, the Torch! It disappeared—went: no one knew where. He trusted me. Before a year he was dead: and I had it alone. Do you wonder I was a miser, Matthew—with that always on my mind? That, and the thought that if I died—

MATTHEW. Yes—what if you had died?

ANTHONY. It would have gone, Matthew: no one would ever have known. It wouldn't have come to you, being under another name. There, that's the signature the Bank knows [*He signs and hands it across*] and the other one is in here [*gives him the sealed packet*]. Those two signatures together are all you'll want. Then it'll be all yours. [*His hand falls on the pile of letters that is waiting for him*].

So Barret wasn't at the office, you say? I suppose he's laid up too.

MATTHEW. He didn't tell you so, over the 'phone?

ANTHONY. No . . . no.

MATTHEW [*With cold control of himself*]. When you are away, doesn't Barrett open your letters for you?

ANTHONY. Not personal ones. He didn't open that: that came "care of the firm," registered.

MATTHEW. To the office? Then he probably signed for it. With the Bank's name on it, I see.

ANTHONY. You can open it, it's for you, Matthew. Here's another from the Bank. I sent them notice for the surrender of all securities on demand, three days ago.

MATTHEW. That, too, was written from the office?

ANTHONY. From the office address. I wrote it here. Why?

[MATTHEW *without answer begins fearfully to open the sealed packet, cutting it at the edge.* ANTHONY *takes up the Bank's letter, opens and begins to read it.*

MATTHEW [*In a dead voice*]. There's nothing here, sir: the paper is blank [*he examines the*

envelope]. The seal has been lifted off with a hot knife, and put on again.

[*A choking sound causes him to look around.* ANTHONY *falls back speechless, the Bank letter open in his hand.* MATTHEW *takes and reads it; a look of blank horror comes over him. A hurried knock is heard.* MATTHEW *goes to the entrance lobby and opens the outer door.* PARTRICK *enters.*

PARTRICK. Matthew, there's been dirty business! Are you alone? Oh!

[*He starts back in consternation at sight of* ANTHONY *in collapse.*

MATTHEW [*absolutely ignoring his father*]. Yes, yes! No matter. Go on! What is it?

PARTRICK. Channing has been arrested.

MATTHEW. Where?

PARTRICK. At Barrett's door . . . That means that you, I, any one may be next.

MATTHEW. Channing—why Channing?

PARTRICK. Because Barrett made the appointment; and to-day, under an assumed name, Barrett sailed for America.

MATTHEW. Read that!

[*He gives* PARTRICK *the Bank's letter, and stands watching as he reads. Meanwhile, behind them,* ANTHONY, *smitten with stroke, sits and stares, pitiable and speechless, at the disaster which he has brought about.*

PARTRICK [*Having read*]. But I don't understand.

MATTHEW [*Driving his points home with the letter before him*]. That was the Fund—"handed over yesterday to your accredited representative upon receipt of the signed authorization of the two Trustees." That "accredited representative" was Barrett. That was the Fund! And this—look!—this was the Plan! Nothing!

PARTRICK. My God, what are we to do?

MATTHEW. We can do nothing—except run. Time's up. The Torch is out!

[*A single knock is heard. Against the window-blind goes the flash of a bull's-eye lantern. The two men stand staring at each other. In the chair, the old dying man sits and stares. The knock is repeated.*

CURTAIN

Moonshine

A One Act Play

Moonshine

IN a dim narrow street stands an old dilapidated house; a door and one window occupy the wall, with a roof-casement above. To right and left rise the blank walls of factories, from one of which depends an old-fashioned street lamp. It is a dark winter night; the hour has just struck, and bells, a little out of tune, are still chiming the tag-end of a Christmas hymn. In thick coat and gloves a POLICEMAN *passes slowly upon his beat, exercising his bull's-eye lantern as he goes. A moment later a light crosses the blind of the lower window, and one hears from within the slow querulous cough of age. A sound of lock and bolt follows; and the light disappears.*

Into this re-created loneliness steals a weary and woebegone PIERROT. *He halts, leans in discouragement against the wall, and sighs very sorry for himself.*

PIERROT. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! . . . Moon! . . . Moon! . . . Moon! . . . Why don't you answer?

[*Moonlight comes stealing and encircles the spot where he stands.*

Oh! there you are. Moon, where am I going to sleep to-night?

[*The Moonlight shifts along the wall, halts at the door of the unlighted house, and disappears.*

That's no answer! That means nowhere! You are very rude, very nasty, very unkind!

[*But now in the window a light has returned.*

Hullo! I thought you were empty. Well, there's somebody; I'll try.

[*And now, having an audience,* PIERROT *is a player again. His spirits revive, and he knocks as one not without hope.*

Rat-a-tat! "Who's that?"
Why, it's me!
"Who's me?"
Rat-a-tat! Blind bat,
Come and see!

[*The light ascends to the attic; an* OLD MAN *opens, and peers out.*

OLD MAN. Who's there?

PIERROT. A poor little bow-bow,
Made of white plaster.
Lost by its master,
And can't find a home!

OLD MAN. What are you talking like that for? What do you want?

PIERROT. I want a bed that I can sleep in. Have you got one?

OLD MAN. No. I have *not!*

PIERROT. Why not? Too full of fleas?

[*The window slams, the light descends again.* PIERROT *is left solitary.*

Too full of himself! That's why.

[*Suddenly the moon shines again.*

Oh, it's no use your making eyes like that, and looking so pleased! You've brought me to the wrong door.

[*But the Moon continues to shine steadily.*

Not? What? Knock again, eh?

[*The Moonlight shifts to the top of the window.*

Ah! A hole in his blind.

Let's see what's behind!

I'll climb up and look through.

[*He mounts the window-sill, and looks through the hole.*

Now! What kind are *you?*

[*He begins mimicking.*

"I'm a feeble old man,
Not a tooth in my 'ead;
And you give me a fright,
When you come with your knockings
At this time of night;
I was washing my stockings.
And half-way to bed!"
And now—oh, look!
He has been and took,

And he's hanging them up in the chimney-nook!

Ah, it's no use, my friend! Santa Claus won't come to you. You aren't kind to little boys. He only comes to kind people. [*The* OLD MAN'S *light passes to the attic.* PIERROT *jumps down.*

Ah! if I were Santa Claus, I'd put something into those stockings of yours that would—

[*An idea suddenly strikes him.*

I say, Moon! Has Santa Claus gone by yet? Hardly, I should think.

Now I know what I'm going to do:

I'm going to put Santa Claus on you!

Send him along, Moon, send him along!

And now for a song.

[*Just as the* OLD MAN'S *light goes out* PIERROT *starts singing.*

Good King Wenceslas looked out.
On the Feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about,
Crisp, and deep, and even.
Brightly shone the moon that night
Though the frost was cruel,
When an old man came in sight
Gathering winter fuel.

[*During this performance the* OLD MAN *has opened his window and looked out. Leaving*

it wide he makes a swift descent, softly unlocks the door, and creeps out armed with a pillow.

PIERROT. Hither, Page, and stand by me: If thou—[*The pillow descends on* PIERROT'S *head, bursts, and all the feathers fly.* PIERROT *turns a somersault. The* OLD MAN *is back in his house again, and the door locked*]. All right! All right! Don't hurt yourself. I can take a hint. Not wanted, eh? But I've not done with you yet,—so don't think! [*The attic window is shut with a slam*]. Good-night! Sleep well! . . . Hullo!

[*This is addressed to* SANTA CLAUS *who now enters, clothed as every one expects him to be clothed, and carrying a large bag on his shoulder.*

SANTA CLAUS. Hullo!

PIERROT. Is that you, Santa Claus?

SANTA CLAUS. It is. And who are you, pray?

PIERROT. A poor little bow-bow,
Made of white plaster!
Haven't got a master,
Haven't got a home!

SANTA CLAUS. Dear me! How sad! And your name?

PIERROT. Pierrot. You don't remember me?

SANTA CLAUS. I remember many Pierrots. You are all very much alike.

PIERROT. Ah! It's only inattentiveness and

shortsightedness makes you say that. You used to put things in my stocking for me; but since I've not had a home, you've left off.

SANTA CLAUS. Why haven't you a home?

PIERROT. It ran away from me.

SANTA CLAUS. Come, come! It isn't homes that run away.

PIERROT. Yes, it is; when they are on wheels, like mine was!

SANTA CLAUS. Oh, a caravan, you mean?

PIERROT. Yes: yellow, with red legs,—answered to the name of "Charlie." It always had chicken for supper.

SANTA CLAUS. So I should suspect. And what did it run away for?

PIERROT. Just took fright
In the middle of the night.
And the Bobbies all ran after it.—
But didn't catch it quite.

Didn't catch me either: I ran the other way.

SANTA CLAUS. Ah! You're not so innocent as you look, my young friend.

PIERROT. No. Are you?

SANTA CLAUS. Well, I don't have to run away from people.

PIERROT. How dull! Yes, Santa Claus, and that's just what you are: you're dull!

SANTA CLAUS. I wasn't aware of it.

PIERROT. You've grown old.

SANTA CLAUS. I was always old: that's my charm.

PIERROT. Stale, dead stale!

SANTA CLAUS. Indeed?

PIERROT. Yes; you are a chestnut; an old joke that we all know by heart. You've left off being original,—never do anything you are not expected to do; so of course nobody believes in you.

SANTA CLAUS. Don't they?

PIERROT [*scornfully*]. No! Children now think it's their own stupid fathers and mothers who put things into their stockings. When they say it's *you,* they only pretend.

SANTA CLAUS. But it *is* me!

PIERROT. I know that; but they don't believe it. It's your own fault, Santa Claus.

SANTA CLAUS. Why?

PIERROT. Because, as I tell you, you never do anything unlikely or unexpected. You are an old-fashioned, conventional respecter of persons; a toady: you believe in class.

SANTA CLAUS. Pierrot, that is not true!

PIERROT. Yes, it is! for you give rich presents to rich children, and poor presents to poor children; and to children who have no friends (like me) you give no presents at all! And you give dolls to little girls, and drums to little boys, and rattles to babies; so, of course, they

think that such likely and expected things come from people who know them.

SANTA CLAUS. But what else can I do?

PIERROT. Pooh! What couldn't you do, if you gave your mind to it? You could give little presents to big people, and big presents to little people; and dolls to the boys and drums to the girls—so that improving on Providence, they could make more suitable presents to each other. And you could give nice new mammas to orphans who have only got aunts, and papas to babies who are not supposed to have any. Think of the excitement of waking up and finding a real live papa in one's stocking—alive and kicking! My word! that would be a sensation. They would begin to believe in you then . . . I say, Moon, has that old man gone to sleep yet?

SANTA CLAUS. Well, Pierrot, go on! I'm listening.

PIERROT. And then, why do you limit yourself to children? Why not grown-up people? Think what a moral emblem you might be to some of them! Give a curate's egg to a bishop, and make him eat it: and a millionaire's promise of marriage to a poor old pauper; and her answer accepting, to the millionaire; and everybody's written apology to everybody they've offended: and— My

wig! what a world we should all wake up to on Christmas morning! In here, for instance, lives an old man whose stockings want filling badly: and there they are, hanging up, waiting for you. Why not begin on him?

SANTA CLAUS. What's he like?

PIERROT. Oh! just like everybody else who has left off expecting nice things to happen. He's cross, and crabby, and crusty, and very miserable. He's got into a groove. Get him out of it!

SANTA CLAUS. I must have a look at him.

PIERROT. He's gone to bed. Up there. All right: I'll give you a back. How d'you mean to get in? Down the chimney?

[*So saying he hoists* SANTA CLAUS *up to the window. The Moonlight has faded.*

SANTA CLAUS. Steady! Steady!

[*Enter* POLICEMAN.]

POLICEMAN. Now then, now then! This won't do, you know. What are you two a-doing there?

PIERROT. Oh! are you the dear nice policeman?

POLICEMAN. A policeman's what I am.

PIERROT. This is dear nice kind Santa Claus.

POLICEMAN. Never heard of the gentleman.

PIERROT. Father Christmas, I mean.

[SANTA CLAUS *has descended from* PIERROT'S

shoulder, and the POLICEMAN *now appears satisfied that he has not to do with criminals. With a twinkle of humour he touches his headpiece.*

POLICEMAN. Oh, I beg your pardon, I'm sure, sir. Didn't recognize you.

SANTA CLAUS. But I recognize you. You live two streets away, don't you? Number 10.

POLICEMAN [*rather surprised*]. I do, sir.

SANTA CLAUS. Name Donkin, I think: George Donkin.

POLICEMAN [*trying to see through the disguise*]. If you was to take that beard off, I'd know who I was talking to.

SANTA CLAUS. Married man?

POLICEMAN. I believe so.

SANTA CLAUS. With three nice little children, all nicely asleep.

POLICEMAN. They was so when I left 'em.

SANTA CLAUS. I've just been filling their stockings for them.

POLICEMAN [*indulgently*]. Very good of you, I'm sure, sir.

SANTA CLAUS. Let me see! What did I put in?—a doll, a drum, and a rattle.

PIERROT. Good old chestnut!

POLICEMAN. Quite correct, sir. I brought them myself this afternoon.

SANTA CLAUS. Oh, don't mention it!

POLICEMAN. No, sir; of course not, sir.

SANTA CLAUS. By the way, do your children really believe in me?

POLICEMAN. Well, I couldn't say, sir, for certain. The baby, he don't know what he believes yet. The boy—as he's only five—maybe *he* does, in a sort of way. The girl,—well, sir, I reckon she'd think you was pulling her leg, if you tried it on with her. We call it Father Christmas for short, you know.

SANTA CLAUS. It's very disappointing, very annoying, I must say. Now if I were to empty those stockings again, then you *would* believe in me.

POLICEMAN. You are quite welcome to empty 'em again, sir, if you sees your way to it.

SANTA CLAUS. Oh, I am, am I? Pierrot, this good man doesn't believe in me.

PIERROT [*pointing to house*]. Nor does he.

SANTA CLAUS. I'm going to make him: both of them. Help me up again!

[SANTA CLAUS, *assisted by* PIERROT, *prepares to mount the roof.*

POLICEMAN. Now what are you meaning to do, sir?

SANTA CLAUS. Get down his chimney, of course. That's my usual way.

POLICEMAN. No, sir; I can't allow that, sir.

PIERROT. Why not? He got down yours?

POLICEMAN. Oh, I've no doubt he did, sir. But this is on my beat, sir; and it won't do; it really won't do. [PIERROT *strikes an attitude.*

PIERROT. Policeman, this is *my* beat. Understand—mine!

POLICEMAN [*ironically*]. My mistake, sir. My mistake, of course.

PIERROT. Moon!

[*Thus invoked, the Moon shines with quite extraordinary brilliance. The* POLICEMAN *turns his lantern on to it, but the Moon is not to be effaced. It continues to shine: and the* POLICEMAN'S *faith in himself begins to be shaken.*

PIERROT. Have you ever seen the Moon before?

POLICEMAN [*uneasily*]. Well, I've never seen so much of it before.

PIERROT. Probably not. You are going to see more of it.

POLICEMAN. I hope not, sir.

PIERROT. Santa Claus, have you a banjo about you?

SANTA CLAUS. No; but he has.

[*And to the* POLICEMAN'S *horrified amazement —equal to that of Adam when from his rib came Woman,—*SANTA CLAUS *draws a banjo from his waist-belt.*

POLICEMAN. Here! You've took my truncheon!

SANTA CLAUS. Your banjo.

[*He presents it to* PIERROT.

PIERROT. Thank you.

POLICEMAN. Am I dreaming, or am I drunk?

PIERROT. Now attend, everybody!

[*He sings.*]

Come, little Moonshine, come!
Come Moon!
We're wanted! Here's a house
Which begs a boon from thee!
Within there shines no light;
It keeps its heart
Shut up, lives all apart;
'Tis dumb, and cannot see!
Come, Moonshine, come!
Come, when I call,
And break into this house:
Pull down this wall,
Open its windows, give it air and light!
See, this is Santa Claus,
And this is he—Policeman Donkin G,—
Who, every night
With law-abiding feet
Patrols this street.
And this?—oh, this is me!

[*The clock strikes twelve.*]

Come, Moonshine, come!
And with thy silver key
(There's midnight by the clock!)
Unlock, unlock, unlock—
This house for me!

[*And now an extraordinary thing happens; for the Moon does apparently come down in a large circle of light and strike against the wall of the house; and under its radiance the wall seems to melt away; the door softly opens; and there within one sees the* OLD MAN *lying upon his bed, and his stockings hanging dry above a fire of dying embers, and near by an empty chair with patchwork cushions.*

POLICEMAN [*To* SANTA CLAUS]. Would you mind telling me, sir, whether I'm awake, or whether I'm dreaming?

SANTA CLAUS. I can't answer for people who don't believe in me. *I'm* awake: that's all I know.

PIERROT [*To the* POLICEMAN]. You're dreaming: such a nice dream! After you, Santa Claus. [SANTA CLAUS *goes in;* PIERROT, *about to follow, stops at the door.*

PIERROT. Now I hope your conscience is satisfied? You wouldn't let my friend go down the chimney: you wouldn't let us climb up on to the roof to look in through the window. You

thought we were house-breakers. No! we don't break into houses: "peaceful penetration" is our method. Look! Santa Claus is putting something into the old man's stocking. I wonder what? Has he put anything into yours? Good-night, Mr. Policeman; the Moon has found a bed for me. Thank you, Moon; you can lock up now.

[*He goes in, and as the Moonlight begins to fade you see him take the cushions from the old chair, throw them to the ground and lie down on them. Suddenly the* OLD MAN *starts up in his bed, and utters a cry. The walls of the house close solid again: the door is shut. The attic window flies open.*

OLD MAN. Police! Help! Help! Police!

POLICEMAN. What's the matter, sir?

OLD MAN. There are thieves in my house. Arrest them!

POLICEMAN. No, sir; you're only having a dream, sir. I've been having the same.

OLD MAN. Help! Help!

POLICEMAN. Now don't you go making that noise; you'll wake the neighbourhood. Just you go and lie down again.

OLD MAN. But they are here! They are still here.

POLICEMAN. No, sir: believe me, sir. No-

body's got into your house. I've been standing here for the last half-hour. If they had got in I should have seen 'em.

OLD MAN. Am I not to believe my senses?

POLICEMAN. No, sir, you mustn't. Very dangerous thing to do at this time of night.

OLD MAN. Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?

POLICEMAN. Go back to bed as I tell you. If you don't I'll 'ave to charge you for disturbance and breach of the peace.

[*The* OLD MAN *throws up his arms, and falls forward weeping upon the window-sill.*

OLD MAN. Oh God! God! Am I going mad?

POLICEMAN [*soothingly*]. No, believe me, sir; you've only been having a dream.

[*The* OLD MAN *continues to sob feebly. The window blows to; slowly the blind slides down and covers him. The* POLICEMAN'S *hand goes down to his side; he starts.*

Hullo! My truncheon's gone, though.

[*The door opens softly, and* SANTA CLAUS *comes out.*

SANTA CLAUS. Returned with thanks.

[*He gives him back his truncheon.*

POLICEMAN [*taking it doubtfully*]. You know, sir, I don't understand all this.

SANTA CLAUS. Of course not, as you don't believe in me.

POLICEMAN. I don't know what to believe, now. I really don't!

SANTA CLAUS. I suppose you don't happen to feel anything in your stocking?

POLICEMAN. Well, sir, now you mention it, I believe I do.

SANTA CLAUS. What is it, do you think?

POLICEMAN [*feeling tentatively*]. Feels like a bit of paper. [*He takes it out*]. Why, blast me, if it isn't a £5 note!

SANTA CLAUS. Well, would you think I was pulling your leg, if I asked you to believe in me now?

POLICEMAN. I'll believe in anything—in reason, sir—if you'll only let me alone. Can't you see I'm asleep and having a dream?

SANTA CLAUS. Asleep on duty, eh?

POLICEMAN. Yes. To-morrow I shall have to report myself.

SANTA CLAUS. That's a very unusual thing to happen, isn't it,—for a policeman to report himself?

POLICEMAN. I've never known it done yet, sir.

SANTA CLAUS. Ah! then that's all right! To-morrow when you wake up you will believe in me . . . Good-night . . . Good-night.

[*Slowly he departs; but the* POLICEMAN *does not answer. Convinced that he really must be asleep there he stands stock still; and the night*

passes, and the grey of dawn begins; and the drawn blinds of the house grow pale in the gathering light. Roused by the rattle of a milk-man's cart, the POLICEMAN *comes to himself and finds the world real again.*

POLICEMAN. Well, well! I do dream queer sometimes!

[*The door opens; out comes the* OLD MAN; *he carries a pair of stockings in one hand, and some half-wrapped parcels in the other.*

OLD MAN. Oh, but it's true! It's true! One of them is still there, asleep.

POLICEMAN. Good morning, sir. Happy Christmas to you.

OLD MAN. Was it you let those two come into my house last night?

POLICEMAN. Not to my knowledge, sir: not in the regulations to do that, sir.

OLD MAN. Oh yes, it was you!

POLICEMAN [*stolidly*]. You must have been dreaming, sir.

OLD MAN [*displaying the parcels and the stockings*]. But look! It's all come true!

POLICEMAN. Those *your* stockings, sir?

OLD MAN. Yes: and in one of them I found—look!—these. And *I* didn't put them there! And in the other—was a five pound note!

POLICEMAN [*startled*]. Eh? A five pound note,

you say? Well, if you dream like that, it's worth doing!

[*With a growing remembrance he begins to search his pocket, and presently stands dumbfounded, confronted by the materialization of his own dream. Meanwhile the* OLD MAN *continues.*

OLD MAN. Last night they came into my house, an old man, and a boy with a white face. And there were these stockings hanging, and I saw the old man go to them. And the boy, he came in, and lay down in front of the fire, and went to sleep. And then it all grew dark, and I was too frightened to come down: I just waited till it was light. But just now, when I —when I woke up—he was there still!

[*From the attic window pops the head of* PIERROT; *he climbs out, and prances along the roof.*

POLICEMAN. That boy still there you say?

OLD MAN. Yes! Yes!

POLICEMAN [*resolutely*]. I'll come and have a look at him, then.

[*The* OLD MAN *has gone back into the house; the* POLICEMAN *is about to follow.*

PIERROT. Cock-a-doodle-doo! [*With a skip and a flourish he disappears over the roof.*

OLD MAN [*from within*]. Ah! He's gone!

POLICEMAN [*collecting himself slowly*]. Well! It's just as well, you know. He was a bit of a shady character. But he was a nice boy!

OLD MAN [*wistfully*]. He was—beautiful! [*Suddenly the* POLICEMAN *catches sight of one of the* OLD MAN'S *parcels from which the paper covering has slipt.*

POLICEMAN. Will you let me have a look at—that there—doll. Ah! And that! And that! [*He takes them one by one*]. Well, I'm—I'm done! He's been and took 'em somehow! . . . But he's paid me well for 'em!

OLD MAN. I'll give 'em to you, Mr. Policeman. They ain't no use to me.

POLICEMAN. Will yer, though?

OLD MAN. Very willingly.

POLICEMAN. Thank you. Thank you very much indeed! [*Examines them*]. Aye! Tottenham Court road, that's where I bought 'em. So now I must hurry home to them kids; else, when they wakes up they'll be disappointed. . . . Believe in yer? I reckon I've got to believe in yer now! [*And so, apostrophising the absent* SANTA CLAUS, *he goes. And after him, with imitative strut, comes* SANTA CLAUS.

CURTAIN

A Fool and his Money

A Wayside Comedy

A Fool and his Money

A Wayside Comedy

NOT the sort of road where one wants to be alone after dark. Above its high bank tangled with brushwood the forest trees stand thick, and their gnarled and twisted roots have made queer burrows in the soil, where something bigger than a fox could find hiding. The light is already fading, and one does not notice at first the elderly ragamuffin who sits hunched on the bank with his legs slung over a fallen tree-trunk, smoking meditatively and rather miserably, for indeed he has an unprosperous look. A whistle of queer cadence brings him in furtive haste to his feet. He, TIM, *stands listening, and to him enters in shuffling haste, limp-footed, his pal* TONY, *younger and less of a weakling, but almost as much of a ragamuffin as himself. In spite of their difference, they make an obvious pair, shady in character, and you would do well to avoid them.*

TIM. Well? Any luck?

TONY. I've got a nail in me heel. And it 'urts.

TIM. Why did you keep walking on it?

TONY. So as not to lose time, ye fool.—That all the thanks I get!

TIM [*with an effort at comprehension*]. Ho, you've news have yer?

TONY [*grumpily admitting it*]. Ugh.

TIM. Something up? [*Then with a hopeful reading of that sour regard*]. A likely job, eh?

TONY [*encouragingly*]. There's more fools in the world than you,—and bigger at that. Here: see!

[*He produces a coin on which the other feasts his eyes.*

TIM. Ha! Gold! How did you come by it?

TONY [*conscious of having done a sensible thing*]. Put me mug down on top of it, while the fool as it belonged to saw double, so didn't miss it.

TIM. Drunk, was he?

TONY [*depreciative*]. No, just young . . . Been paid his wages, and was telling 'em all about it.

TIM. His wages:—and didn't miss *that?*

TONY. Aye: five years of 'em. Now he's on his way home. And this is the road he comes by . . . Found that out.

TIM [*warming to the prospect*]. Ho! What's he like?

TONY [*to abate a confidence which* TIM, *by himself, has no right to*]. Tallish, straightish; stronger than you and me put together; and a thick cudgel in his hand. And he don't carry his gold slung on the end of it, neither.

TIM [*nonplussed*]. Eh! What are we going to do, then?

TONY [*with contemptuous relish*]. Huh! I reckoned you'd want time to think about it. That's why I run, without waiting to pick nails out of me heels . . . I'm going to give him his gold back again . . . Chew on that a bit.

TIM. Give it back? Then what the hell did you take it for?

TONY. Took it for why I tell yer:—to give it back to him. Didn't I say he was a bigger fool than you? Well, picture him:—and take your time over it. You get into that hole! And when I bring him along to sit down by yer—you do the best for him you can. When he gets his moneybag out, he'll be putting down his cudgel for one thing, and he'll have his back to you for another. See?

TIM [*beginning to dimly comprehend*]. Ah.

TONY. Right! That's your chance. And when I give you the word you've got to use it, quick and sharp, mind that!

TIM. Aye: I won't lose time.

TONY. So; now I'll be getting on back again.

TIM [*panic stricken*]. What are ye going back for? I can't do it alone.

TONY. Look here! D'you take me for a bigger fool than the two of yer? [TIM *shakes a*

vague head]. No? Well, don't forget it: I'm not. Now, get into your hole . . . [TIM *begins timorously to inspect the earth he is to get into*]. I slip out of the tavern just before he was starting. Sleep in town?—No: going to walk all night, he was; with just a bit of rest by the way. "I'll give you a rest!" I says to myself. Then I come away on.

TIM. Here. Suppose anyone else was to come along?

TONY. Well, what if they did? I shouldn't give you the word till they'd gone, that's all.

TIM [*with deprecation in his tone*]. You don't mean finishing him, do yer?

TONY. I never want to finish anybody, so long as they don't make me. Depends on 'ow he behaves. You must judge:—or I'll judge for yer. But maybe he's not so big a fool as all that. Whist! Get in with yer! I'm off.

[TONY *has obviously heard something: crouching into the undergrowth he creeps back the way he has come.* TIM *contemplates the hole in the bank, and the log lying in front of it. Up against a situation which he thinks may prove difficult, he begins to prepare for it by getting out his knife.*

TIM. I ain't so sure whether to finish him first wouldn't be safer. You never quite know.

I'll be ready for it, anyway. If I don't get his stick, he'll have to get mine. TONY ain't the only—

[*A voice singing in the distance causes him to slip into his hole. He disappears into its depths; for a moment his head re-emerges, then disappears again. Presently, singing to suit his pace, the* FOOL *enters. He is fair and of a ruddy countenance, an obviously simple character. Dressed in corduroys, he walks with a bundle slung across his back from the end of a stout cudgel, and to look at him you would say he was still more of a boy than a man.*

FOOL [*sings*]. Then if so be, she looks at me,
And takes me for a stranger,
I'll say five year it's been, my dear,
Since I became a ——

[*The voice of* TONY, *calling from behind, causes him to break off and look round.*

TONY. Hi! Hi! Stop. I say: Stop!

FOOL. Who are ye after, then? Is it me you're calling?

TONY. Who else 'ud it be [*And* TONY *enters, as from a distance, a good deal out of breath, also apparently out of temper*]. I've been hollering after yer for a mile, but ye wouldn't hear.

FOOL. Ah! I was making some kind of row myself. What'll you want with me?

TONY. Well, first I'm telling you what a fool you are.

FOOL. I've been hearing that any day these five years. But since I come away I've missed it.

TONY. Ah, I heard you gabbling back there in the town. You'd got a master wiser than yourself anyway—till he trusted you with money. 'A was as big a fool as you then. Did you ever see that before? [*He holds up the gold piece.*

FOOL. Well, I can't say. I've seen like it.

TONY. You didn't throw it about on the floor, did yer, while you was so admiring yourself for 'aving fifty pounds to your pocket,—after five years slaving for it?

FOOL. Did I? Ah. Like enough I did, though. For every time I went for to count, it come different. Yet I knowed it was fifty pounds all the time. For he wouldn't have done me, would he now: not after I'd served him them five years?

TONY. That depends what kind of man he was. . . . Didn't you count it when he gave it yer?

FOOL [*ingenuously*]. No, I didn't count it. I was so main glad to get it. I'd been looking forward to it, you see.

TONY. You 'ad, 'ad yer?

FOOL. And when he give it to me in a bag—that was a deal safer than into me hand, wasn't it?

TONY. Depends on the bag? Not if it had a hole in it.

FOOL. Oh, it hadn't a hole in it—cep' here at the top [*He produces the bag for demonstration*]. There has to be a hole there to put the money in,—hasn't there?

TONY. Ugh! And that's how this came to fall out, I suppose. There y'are.

[*He throws him the piece, and gives a kick at* TIM'S *face, obtrusive from its hole.*

FOOL [*picking it up*]. Ah! That's him. D'you —I like you.

TONY [*cutting him short*]. If you was to count it now, you'd see whether you'd got it all. There's no knowing. You might have thrown more away. Sit down, here!

[*And they sit down just where* TONY *arranges they shall sit.*

FOOL [*conscious of previous failure*]. Count it? I'd rather you counted: I ain't no hand at counting. [TONY *seems to think, however, that the money is more handy left as it is. He takes it in his hand, weighs it, then sets it down again.*

TONY. Ah. That's fifty right enough, by the weight of it.

FOOL. I thought it felt like a hundred. I'd never touched gold before—in me hand. Ain't it beautiful? [*He holds up the coin that has*

been returned to him]. Just like a bit o' sunlight.

[TONY *gives a grunt of assent. He watches his chance to extract the cudgel lying at his side.*

And that's what it is, sunlight: only it's got a sound, too. As I come along I could hear the chink of it—all day. I can still. It was—it was like music.

TONY. Was it?

FOOL. Aye. Wedding-bells.

TONY. So that's a bit of the peal as you dropped by the way, eh? You'll be ringing it muffled when you gets to the end, if you goes on like that.

FOOL. And you run all the way here to bring it to me? I take that kind of yer—very kind. It 'ud take me a long time to earn another o' they: for I be a fool, you know,—there's no denying that. Master, he said right: "You be the blamedest fool I ever 'ad to break," he says to me, the first day I come to him. I was a boy then; and he used to beat me for it. "Five years," I used to say to myself, "five years!"

TONY. Did he beat you for five years, a great strong lad like you? [*Possessed of the cudgel, he secretes it, passing it from right to left.*

FOOL. No, he begun doing it first, and then he

seemed to forget. I don't know how it come as he left off; but he did. Maybe he saw I was such a fool that there was no mending of me. I don't know. "Five years," I said to myself, "only five years." I said "only" to make it seem short. That was cunning of me, wasn't it?

TONY. Well, it was a way of getting over the ground.

FOOL. And then, after a while, it was only four years, and then only three, and then two, and—

TONY. And then one. Yes, I could guess that for myself.

FOOL. And it's funny, you know: It didn't seem long looking forward, but it do seem long looking back. I'd almost forgotten myself when I come away.

TONY. Was he kind to yer—when he didn't beat yer? [*Begins to pass cudgel to his right hand.*

FOOL [*ingenuously*]. No, he wasn't kind to me. You see he was my master, and he had to get out of me all he could for the money he'd got to pay me. And I was a fool, there's no denying that, is there?

TONY [*drily*]. No. Did he feed yer?

FOOL [*cheerfully*]. Yes, sometimes. And on a farm, you know, there's lots lying about.

They can't starve yer, any more than they can starve a sheep in a field.

TONY. Where did you sleep?

FOOL. Oh, just anywhere.

TONY. And what about clothes.

[*He prepares for action,* TIM, *also, knife in hand, waits expectant.*

FOOL. The missus give me these when I come away. She was kind. They belonged to her son; he fell off the hayrick and got killed in 'em. So she didn't want to see 'em again.

[*This gives the two worthies a superstitious shock; they are off colour for awhile.*

TONY. So a man was killed wearing them clothes, was he? D'you think they'll bring you luck?

FOOL. Well, she give 'em to me. And they was the first good clothes I ever had in my life. There's luck in that ain't there?

TONY. It's a way of looking at it.

FOOL. Everything's the way you look at it: that's life.

TONY [*dazed by the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley coming from a fool's mouth*]. Eh?

FOOL. This bit o' money: it's pretty, ain't it? Somebody must a' took a lot o' trouble making that—with the King's head on it and all.

TONY [*his mind fidgeting him*]. Hadn't you

better put it back again now you've got it? No? [*as the* FOOL *makes a movement towards the bag*] put it in your pocket and keep it—for luck. Then if you lose the bag you've got that anyway.

FOOL. Ah! So I will [*he pockets it*]. I take it very kind of yer to have come after me all that way.

TONY. Oh, don't mention it! [*Then, challengingly*]. You don't think I'm a thief, do you?

FOOL. No: but you might just have left it there and thought I should come back for it. But I never should. And—it would have been a sad blow, that would have been when I got home. A pound short, I should 'a been then.

TONY [*fastening on the one point to avoid the other*]. So you've got a home, have yer?

FOOL. The place I was born in.

TONY. Family?

FOOL. No; they're all underground. That's why I come away. The night my father died the house was burned down. And it was his doing, you know, for he'd drunk more than he ought. I hadn't a stick or a penny left in the world then.

TONY. Nor no one to care for yer?

FOOL. Oh, there was some one cared for me: but you see she—she didn't belong to me.

But when I come away we said we'd remember each other. And once every year she've sent word to me: and she remembers. Have ye ever heard the like o' that?

TONY [*with slow conviction*]. I never 'ave.

FOOL [*fervently*]. I couldn't have believed it; but it's true.

TONY. Are yer going back to marry 'er?

FOOL. Yes.

TONY. Are yer sure she'll have yer?

FOOL. Yes.

TONY. Why?

FOOL. Because she remembers me.

TONY. Remembering ain't everything, though.

FOOL. She remembers what a fool I am. She likes me for being a fool, she says.

TONY. Well, it may be the taste of some. I don't care much for fools myself.

FOOL. Some 'ud say you was a fool for coming after me with that money: but I don't. I take it very kind of yer. It's things like that make one feel—feel ye don't know how—just good to be alive.

TONY. So you think life good, do yer?—after all them beatings, and a hard master always telling yer yer was a fool.

FOOL. 'Twas only five years: and I knew what 'ud happen at the end.

TONY. That you'd go home again?

FOOL. Aye. And I knew I should have them fifty pounds.

TONY. And if you didn't have the fifty pounds —what then?

FOOL [*blank at the mere thought*]. Oh! Then I shouldn't have her.

TONY. Oh! 'er wants fifty pounds, does 'er?

FOOL. No: it's her father.

TONY. For her dower, you mean?

FOOL. Oh, no! He don't care whether she have a dower or not. It's for himself. "When a daughter's useful in the house," he says, "I don't let her go for nothing," he says. I shouldn't ever have thought o' that, if I'd a daughter. Should you?

TONY [*harassed, he doesn't know why*]. I can't tell yer.

FOOL. The neighbours call him "close." But I don't know. It's just how he's made. We are all made different in some things, and the same in others. He wouldn't let me 'ave her but for that fifty pounds.

TONY. Then when you marry her, you start on nothing again?

FOOL. I shall have *her*.

TONY. And be as badly off as when you started with your master.

FOOL. Oh, but we shan't beat each other. And both of us young—maybe we'll live many years

yet. And she isn't a fool like me: she knows how to manage things: and so long as I can work, what more d'we want?

TONY [*after a pause, resolutely*]. If I said to you—as I was a starving man: that when I—got that bit o' gold in me hand, I'd not had a bit to eat for two days . . . If I told yer that—what should yer do?

FOOL. Oh! Are you so hungry as that? Why didn't ye say? I've plenty o' bread: bought it stale, so as to make it last. [*He starts to undo his bundle.*

TONY [*roughly*]. I don't want your bread: bread ain't enough. When I got my hand on that gold, I'd a use for it—if I'd chose. Why did I come running after yer, d'yer think? I saw yer with any amount of money on yer; I didn't know anything about yer then. Why d'yer think I come?

FOOL. I don't know. I suppose you were a fool, like me.

TONY. Yes: I was a fool. But I wasn't the same sort of fool as you: so don't think: Most men, doing as I've done, 'ud expect something for it. They'd expect to be give something, bringing back to a man money as he'd lost.

FOOL [*feeling his way through a problem*]. Yes . . . of course. . . . as you're needing

it . . . I must give it back to you . . . I oughtn't to have expected it.

TONY [*amazed*]. Give me the whole pound, you mean?

FOOL. Yes: that's what you found. You didn't tell me . . . and I never thought . . . You see, I didn't look on the money as my own. It was for her father: I'd given him my word.

TONY. Yes, yes, I've 'eard all about him as I want to 'ear. Are yer going to give me that pound?

FOOL [*dazed*]. Yes.

[*But he does not move: and* TONY *still has a doubt.* TIM *also, with head out waiting the word, is in some perplexity of what is now required of him.*

TONY. You're *going* to give it me?

FOOL. There it is [*he produces and offers the coin*]. Oh, you are much older than I. Haven't you any—? No: you don't look married somehow. You haven't told me anything about yourself.

TONY. No need. I'm a bad lot I am. But I don't want that pound of yours: I've changed my mind. [*But though* TONY *may have done so,* TIM *has not changed his, and with one hand now on the money-bags, his other is up and ready to strike.* TONY *seeing this, raises his voice.*] I've changed my mind I tell yer,

and I ain't going to take it. Damn yer! Put it back, I say! [TIM *does so*]. Don't be startled lad. I was only talking to myself. I wasn't cursing *you.*

FOOL. Ah, I often talk to myself when I'm feeling lonely. It's like having a friend. Not a bit of bread, eh?

TONY. Don't want it!

FOOL [*understandingly*]. Yes, you do. [*He deposits the bread side by side with the money-bag.*

TONY [*angrily*]. Here! you'd better be off, and look spry about it. This place ain't healthy for a man with fifty pounds loose on him. There: you're leaving it behind now! [*The* FOOL *picks it up and prepares to pocket it again*]. Ain't yer going to count it? I could have put me hand into it while it was lying at your side,—but I didn't.

FOOL. I'm sure you didn't: You been very kind to me.

TONY. Kind to yer? Yer don't know how kind to yer I've been. You won't never know.

FOOL. I shall always remember you. Shall you remember me?

TONY. Yes. And I not the only one. Come, haven't I told yer to be off? You hurry on: it's getting dark.

FOOL. Why, so it is. And there's the moon rising. Good night.

TONY. Good night. Good luck to yer.

FOOL. Ah, I was born lucky, I think. And I haven't so far to go now. Good night [*and so, shouldering his bundle, he goes.*

TONY [*stupent*]. "Born lucky." Lucky ain't the word! Here, you worm, come out of your 'ole! [*Sheepish and non-plussed,* TIM *emerges and stands looking at him, not sure which of them is now to be blamed*]. What yer got to say?

TIM [*meekly defensive*]. Nothing.

TONY [*bullyingly*]. You wanted to take it, did yer?

TIM. No, I didn't. I was only doing what you told me.

TONY. Didn't tell yer to do anything:—not then.

TIM. [*the worm turning at last*]. You told me to get into that 'ole.

TONY [*who is not going to be argued with*]. And now, I've told yer to get out again . . . Tim, we've been fools. Aye [*as he comes to realize it more*] damned fools, both on us. [*He sits down, gets out his pipe, and starts lighting it.*

TIM [*meekly*]. 'Ave we now? I thought as p'raps we 'ad.

TONY. Well, it ain't so bad to be a fool: just for once—just for once. But I don't want a thing like that to happen every day. Not much!

TIM [*plaintively*]. Say, Tony?

TONY. Ugh?

TIM. If we was to be reformed characters, we'd be fools like him.

TONY. Fools like him! . . . He kep' his money all right. He did that. Bless his silly 'eart!

CURTAIN

The House Fairy

A One Act Play in Three Characters

Plot. *To compel the Old Woman back to them, the Fairies start stealing the Child. The Old Woman dances out to her death.*

Note. The transformation scene is not necessary for the play: much can be done with changes of light, and the vibration of strings.

The House Fairy

IN the poor lamp-light of a cottage interior, and by the flicker of an open fire, three people are seen variously employed. By the table a young girl stands threading berries upon a string. Her mother, a robust, hard-looking woman of middle age, moves vigorously about, busy at folding and ironing. By the side of the fire sits a small frail old woman with a piece of knitting in her hands, to which now and again slowly and absent-mindedly she applies herself. The outer door, shaken by gusts of wind, tells of a stormy night; and the cry of the wind loud and insistant becomes almost personal, as it breaks into the conversation of the others.

CHILD [*Counting her beads*]. One, two, three, four, five,—

WIND. Schwee! Schwee-wee-wee-wee-wee!

MOTHER. Trouble! What a wind!

CHILD. Six, seven, eight, nine,—

WIND. Schwee! Brrrr! Bang!

CHILD [*startled*]. Oh, mother! How it rattled the door,—like as if someone wanted to come in!

WIND. Schwee, wee-wee-wee!

OLD WOMAN. Eh; it's a fairy night.

CHILD. What's that mean, Granny?

GRANNY. A night when fairies are about.

[*The* OLD WOMAN'S *voice is dreamy and soft with a sort of slow wonder; and her eyes, whether she speaks or is silent, have a listening regard.*

MOTHER [*as she moves round the table at her work*]. Here! Take those away! I can't do with 'em. Right away.

CHILD [*aggrieved*]. Don't! I'm threading 'em!

MOTHER. Thread 'em somewhere else, and ha' done! In ten minutes it'll be your time for bed.

CHILD. No, I don't want!

MOTHER. You'll go when I tell yer.

[*The* CHILD *carries her work over to the fireside.*

GRANNY. What ha' ye got there, my dear?

CHILD [*still plaintive with her grievance*]. Rowan berries, Granny.

GRANNY. What are ye doing wi' they?

CHILD. Making a string to wear, so as the fairies can't steal me. They can't then; some'n told me.

GRANNY. No, to be sure! Eh! Let's see you put 'em on.

CHILD [*as she starts putting them on*]. They ain't quite done yet. I'm making 'em to go round twice . . . see? You see, Granny?

[*But, following her own thoughts, the* OLD WOMAN *has become inattentive. She speaks in a crooning sing-song*].

GRANNY. When the wind is in the rushes,
And the ripple's on the stream,
Deep among the bushes
Hidden eyes gleam.
Keen eyes, green eyes, like fire-flies they seem,
When the wind bears down the rushes,
And the ripples stroke the stream.

CHILD. What's that mean, Granny?

GRANNY. It's only a song, my dear.

WIND: Schwee! [*At a sudden gust the latch lifts and the door flies open. The* CHILD'S *hand, still on her necklet snaps the string. The berries are spilled.*

CHILD. Oh! I've broken 'em!

MOTHER. There's that latch given again! Quick, child! Shut it; push the bolt!

[*The* CHILD *goes and fastens the door.*

GRANNY [*in a sing-song again*].
Push the bolt, lock the door!
What's outside you can never be sure.
But eh! when a hand gets hold o' the pin,
What's outside will always come in.
Eh! but it's a fairy night; a fairy night!

CHILD. Have you ever seen a fairy, Granny?

GRANNY [*in a soft whimsy tone*]. Yes.

CHILD. What was it like?

GRANNY. Very like you and me, my dear. Folk might often meet a fairy, and not know.

MOTHER. Oh, Mother, don't go to talk like that! I don't want stuff about fairies put into her 'ead. 'Er's got fancies enough, as 'tis.

GRANNY. Eh, to be sure! Fancy that!

MOTHER. Fairies! Much good we ever got o' they!

[*And so saying, she thumps away at her ironing.*

CHILD. Don't fairies never help folk; poor folk, I mean? Don't they, mother?

MOTHER [*scornfully*]. Ha! They didn't never help us. I can promise you that! [*She crosses to exchange irons at the fire: and as she speaks to the* OLD WOMAN *her voice is raised as though to one a little dense, or deaf*]. Was you ever helped by fairies, Mother, when you'd got all five mouths of us to feed?

GRANNY [*with charitable allowance*]. Eh, no! They didn't ever come to help *me*.

MOTHER. One of the first things I remember, as a small child, was going to beg a loaf o' bread, three miles there and back in bitter cold: one loaf for the five of us!

CHILD. Where was Granny gone?

MOTHER. Somewhere else on the same errand. But I brought one back, and she came back without. Beg! 'er couldn't never open her

mouth to beg, could you, Mother? 'Er just stood gaping, dumb, daft-like, till people laughed and shut the door at her. But if any ever come to beg of *'er,* there wan't any saying "No" then! That loaf as I brought home, we was just starting to eat it when there come a knock—[*As she speaks the wind rattles the door*] and the door opened, and in come a hand, and a voice "Give I a bit of bread!" And our daft mother, 'er cuts a piece off, and goes across and gives it into the hand of a body 'er's never seen! Then come a laugh and a cry—"Have ye had enough of it yet?" —Someone having a joke of us!—Enough!

GRANNY. Eh, sure! We've had hard times together; but we lived through 'em.

MOTHER. You and I! The rest had to go. You was always feckless, Mother.

GRANNY. Aye.

MOTHER. You never knew how to keep house, did yer?

GRANNY. No.

MOTHER. And you never made a bargain in your life. First price offered was always the price you took. No wonder we were all nigh starved! Fairies! If the fairies ever helped us they must 'a done it with their left hands. Here! Go and make up the fire! [*to the* CHILD]. One winter all the thatch blew off

the roof; the next 'twas a flood as swep' the wood-stack away: then three year running one of our goats died. Ah, that was a true word come through the door: "Have ye had enough of it yet?" First and last, I reckon we had.

GRANNY. Eh, but we'd good luck too, some days.

MOTHER. Oh, had we? The only good luck I can remember was when four of us died: fewer mouths to feed then.

CHILD. But *you* didn't want to die, did you, Mother?

MOTHER. I hadn't anything I *did* want; I know that. Oh, you made a poor show, Mother, out of all the lot you had the caring for! It's a poor show you made, I say!

GRANNY. Eh, but I've had 'em; they was mine. I done everything for 'em; heard 'em laugh; see 'em play; had 'em come cold and tired to my arms; made 'em warm; hushed 'em to sleep—many's, many's the time! And when they wanted for anything, 'twas always "Mammy! Mammy!" That meant *me*.

MOTHER. Who else should it mean!

GRANNY. Eh?

MOTHER. I think sometimes you forget you was our mother, you've so lost count o' things. This world's been too much for you, Mother:

God didn't give you enough sense to kill a flea when ye caught it; and we wasn't in luck's way when you was mothering all five of us!

CHILD [*caressingly*]. Granny! Granny dear!

GRANNY [*stroking the* CHILD'S *hand*]. Eh, the world's full o' little things,—little things.

WIND. Schwee!

GRANNY. And I ha'n't had enough of 'em yet.

WIND. Schwee! Brrrr!

GRANNY. No, nor I ain't dead yet, neither. You can tell 'em that. I'm still alive,—still alive.

MOTHER. Yes: it's wonderful how you've managed to last out all the use you ever was.

CHILD. How old are you, Granny?

GRANNY. I'm well over a hundred, my dear.

MOTHER. Mother! What are you telling her? Over a hundred? When was I born, then?

GRANNY. How'd I know? Eh, sure, I've lost count.

MOTHER. I 'aven't lost count o' myself anyhow; nor don't want at my age—with all the things I've got to do.

GRANNY. You: why, you're only a child!

MOTHER. Fifty last birthday.

GRANNY. Fifty? Oh, that's strange! You was a little baby when I come.

MOTHER. When you "come"?

GRANNY. When I first come to have ye.

MOTHER. Well, of course I was a baby, when you first come to have me, Mother. I never heard tell as I was born grown up.

GRANNY. No: a poor wee thing you was. Past fifty, eh? They must 'a forgotten! Ah! it's all the same. It's all the same.

MOTHER. Your Granny's getting soft in her head, Milly. Don't you pay no heed to what she says.

GRANNY. Fifty years! Eh, but it's a fairy night.

[*The* MOTHER *goes into the inner room carrying linen. The wind rises.*

[*Sings.* There they go! There they go!
I can hear 'em riding the wind?

[*Speaks*]. Riding the wind? . . . Eh, but there was a fairy once,—different from the rest: liked to be along o' the common folk, she did; watch 'em at their work, see 'em making the bread, milking the cows, skimming the cream; liked to hearken to their voices, calling their children to bed, talking in the ingle o' nights, making plans for the morrow, learning to know the thoughts of each other's hearts. And along of that—because she'd the friendly mind, she didn't care to go riding the wind with the rest. For they be merry and gay they be, but they haven't got thoughts in their hearts like you and me. One day—

CHILD. Go on, Granny, I'm listening.

GRANNY. One day she come to a house where children were crying—father and mother dead, and no one to fend for them. Eh, little things, little things, they was; and no sooner had she pushed open the door and looked in than she forgot all about being a fairy. In she went—lived with 'em—made it her home.

CHILD. Did they know she was a fairy, Granny?

GRANNY. Nay, nay, they were all too little and young to know anything except to be glad someone was come to look after 'em. But when the fairies found out, they were angry, and came to fetch her away: but she wouldn't go, told 'em she meant to stay and see to the children's needs. "You'll find it a hard life," said they. "Maybe I shall," said she. "In a year's time," they said, "you'll be wanting to come back, and then we wont have you. If you won't come back now," they said, "you've got to stay—fifty years! Sure, and you'll have had enough of it then!" "Eh, may be I shall," she said; so they left her to try. Fifty years. She never saw 'em again.

CHILD. Didn't they come back, Granny?

[*The* MOTHER *returns from the inner room.*

GRANNY. No.

CHILD. Why?

GRANNY. Maybe they didn't care; maybe they forgot. Eh, but it's all the same! It's all the same.

MOTHER. Now Milly! You be off to bed! Kiss your granny good-night.

CHILD. Good-night, Granny.

GRANNY. Good-night, my dear.

CHILD. I'm glad no fairy ever come to look after us, Granny.

GRANNY. Why not, my dear?

CHILD. Because then—then we shouldn't have had you.

MOTHER. Now then! Sharp's the word: off with your shoes, and up you go!

GRANNY. Well, well; to be sure! Eh, little things, little things!

[*The* CHILD *takes off her shoes at the bottom of the stairs, and goes up to bed.*

MOTHER. You don't want the lamp, do you, Mother?

GRANNY. Eh?

MOTHER. The lamp. I'm going to sort over the linen. You can see to do your knitting without the lamp, can't you?

GRANNY. Yes, yes: I can see.

[*The* MOTHER *carries the lamp to the inner room, and the* OLD WOMAN *sits very still and meditative for a while. Then in soft recitative her voice is heard again.*

So off they went a-dancing, off they went a-dancing,
With a crying in the forest, and the wind begun to blow.
They said "We'll come back for you; someday we'll come for you."
They said they'd come back for me fifty years ago.

[*And now the* WIND *rises again, and the air is filled with a strange vibration. Softly the bolted door flies open; in comes the moonlight and begins to fill the room; it almost seems indeed as though the forest itself had entered, displacing walls and windows; everywhere there is a flutter, the place is full of the shadows of leaves in swift motion. Slowly the* OLD WOMAN *becomes aware of the change. She looks, but she is not startled; then it seems as though she heard a voice speaking to her, and thus she answers it:*]

GRANNY. So you haven't forgotten me after all? Aye: fifty years it is: but I'd lost count, till just now I come to remember . . . Changed? So'd you be changed, if you'd lived like me. Ah, you may laugh; but I'm the wiser one now, though you be the merrier . . . No: 'tisn't age: it's life as stands between us now . . . Yes; some of 'em be dead; but some be still alive . . . Oh, you knew that,

did yer? Aye, a pretty one she is; and we be dear friends, she and I . . . No, I don't want, I don't want to come . . . Why? I've told yer why, because I've lived . . . Aye, you may well ask, but you won't understand. Have you ever known sorrow, or hardship? Have you ever known pain—what it is to be hungry, or weary, or cold? Have you ever felt fear for them as you love? Have you ever watched by the dying, or laid the limbs of the dead? Why, you can't even listen to words you don't understand. But it's out of them things you get life: rest of body, comfort of heart, peace of mind, blessed sleep of the weary with never a dream, lying with them as you love warm to your side; waking, seeing 'em live through another day, caring for 'em, fending, making ends meet; always a little different, never the same. It goes away, it goes away; you can't have life without change. But inside there's something as doesn't change, something as keeps. If I came with you, I should have to give all that up . . . [*And now, first in a swift whispered repetition, then with rising tone and with increasing speed, the Fairies begin calling "Milly!"*] It's no use your calling, I don't mean to come . . . What? What's that you say? Milly? Take Milly? Why should I take her? . . . Ah!

No, you don't! I say you don't . . . Stop calling to her! Stop! Milly, Milly, don't listen to 'em. Lie where you are! You shan't take her, you shan't! Rather than let you I'd die! No, and I won't come either: I'll stay where I be.

[*Enter the* CHILD, *walking in her sleep.*

CHILD. What are you calling for, Granny?

GRANNY. I didn't call yer. Go back! Go back to bed!

CHILD. Yes, I'm coming. In a minute: I won't be long.

GRANNY. Milly! Open your eyes! Wake, child! wake up!

CHILD. I'm awake, Granny, I'm coming!

[*She moves to the door, the* OLD WOMAN *staggers to her feet.*

GRANNY. Go back! Go back!

CHILD. Oh, I can see the fairies, Granny! Are we going along o' them?

GRANNY. Wait! Stop! [*Halt and feeble she totters across the room and snatches the* CHILD *back. The* CHILD *stumbles and falls*]. Hark what I say, all of ye! [*The fluttering lights become steadier, the calling voices almost still*]. It isn't her you be wanting: it's me! [*Her voice rises in a frenzy*]. Yes, Yes! I'll come. Take me away! I've had enough? I've had enough!

[*The fluttering lights leap, the vibrations redouble, laughter peals. The* CHILD, *risen to her knees, watches in dazed terror. For a moment the* OLD WOMAN *stands motionless gathering up her strength, then breaks into an abandonment of dance and song.*

Now I come a-dancing, a-dancing, a-dancing;
Here I come a-dancing; for that's the way to go
I am coming back to you, back to you, back to you!
I am bringing back to you a body full of woe.

VOICES [*without.*

Now she comes a-dancing, a-dancing, a-dancing,
Here she comes a-dancing, for that's the way to go.
She is coming back to us, back to us, back to us!
She is bringing back to us a body full of woe!

[*Again laughter peals. The* OLD WOMAN *dances out. The* CHILD *starts up and runs to the door.*

[*Re-enter the* MOTHER, *carrying the lamp. The fairy lights have disappeared.*

MOTHER. Milly! What are you doing there at the door?

CHILD. It's Granny, Mother! She's gone out. Look! She's dancing!

MOTHER. She's mad!

CHILD. No; it's the fairies, Mother.

MOTHER. Come in, you old silly! What's taken ye out there?

CHILD. Oh, look! She's tumbled down! Granny! Granny! [*The* MOTHER *runs out and presently returns carrying the* OLD WOMAN *in her arms. The* CHILD'S *voice strains to sobbing.* Upstairs I heard her calling me: and when I come—

MOTHER. You won't never hear 'er call you again. 'Er's gone and done for herself.

MILLIE. Look! Look!—Granny.

[*The* OLD WOMAN *opens her eyes, looks, sees the* CHILD *standing safe. She tries to speak. Her head falls back.*

MOTHER. Safe? She said "safe"! Who's safe? She's dead.

CURTAIN

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